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Relics, Secular

Kaitlyn Sue Kester

Bard College, kk8970@bard.edu

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Relics, Secular

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Arts
of Bard College

By

Kaitlyn S. Kester

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Finally, I would like to thank my mother for being uncompromising in her support and funding my art and soul.

I have been thinking about venerable objects, the religiosity of art, and secular transcendence. I have been working through moments of spirituality in unforeseen places. And, in this project, I have been aiming to recreate and reconcile my experiences with the systems of religion and systems of art, which, for much of my life have been conflated. My suspicion of religion has been complicated by my witness of masterful iconography and religious architecture (implements designed to forge belief). So too, has my introduction to art history been laden with religious content via the canonical survey texts. I have studied Christian, Islamic, and Pagan art in my time as an art history major, and one shared aspect that always drew my interest was how religious art formally and conceptually systematized an experience of transcendence/immersion for the viewer. That level of human authority in ‘belief’ interested me in exporting this sort-of *transcendence system*. My personal experience with Christianity, culturally and academically, is why I felt comfortable appropriating, severing, and voiding its iconography on many instance in *Relics, Secular*.

Transubstantiation is the literal transformation of the eucharist into the body and blood of christ. It is a deeply complicated ritual, performance—one that implicates the psyche of the audience, usually with the help of the visual props (lighting, architecture, decorative objects). The religious leader performs this ritual and the viewer is made to believe that the physical matter of the object rearranges into another kind of object completely. The myth of it...is the myth of the artist.

The altar space directs the pilgrims to circumambulate the remains of holy people: a toe, a knee, a vertebra. The visitors pay their respects, sometimes with money, and a spiritual transaction occurs. The church is designed to accommodate the masses and spatially influence

the to transcend to a higher level of connectedness with the world, their conceptions, their creator. Museums imitate religious spaces in this way.

The media I use, painting, clay, plaster, and wood, are relics of themselves. And with those old, venerated materials I create little fictions in my head about what is authentic and what is imitation. I draw the lines, I believe them, then I cross them. The corporeal fragments I form with clay, which I preserve by firing and applying underglaze, become archaeological finds. I imagine them in their prior state, their complete form before they were in my hands, and I arrange them according to their own rules. I dress them with synthetic adornments, fillers, and stage them as a spectacle. The filler of unfired clay which connects the hard, fired relics together is for practical use, not authentic to the time or nature of the fired relics. In the insularity of my project I can make the distinction between the true object and the false object, the spiritual and the secular, but outside of my contrived altar space there is no difference. The unfired clay is as real as the fired clay, the synthetic and authentic are equally significant or equally non-significant. The paintings depicts icons modeled on no one, modeled on objects and visual signs that surround them. They turn the objects into recognizable symbols and perpetuate the myth (of my own making).

More often than not, to be a creator is to make people believe in your own distinctions. In this project, I take the active role, for once, and see what happens when the transcendence system is applied in a secular way. Not just as it is in galleries, museums, and government buildings to serve a multitude of purposes, but in a controlled environment where its only purpose is self-referentially produce its own myth. The questions I asked: can I forge transcendence for other people, and where would that leave me in my own transcendent experience? Could I

believe the myth of my own fabrication? What are the ethics of being a creator, a producer of distinctions, fictions, and transparency or opaqueness? Every answer is another question.





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